



Eavesdropping On the World's Secrets

Breaking foreign codes, tapping the Kremlin itself—America's electronic snoopers have now displaced the CIA as the nation's top intelligence gatherers. For an exclusive look at an agency shrouded in secrecy—

Two events, 5,000 miles apart, are calling attention to the worldwide operations of America's most important but one of its least known espionage organizations.

In Moscow at the end of May, American agents discovered a secret shaft with Russian electronic devices in the U.S. Embassy. The Soviets insisted that they planted the devices as a defense against the embassy's sophisticated electronic eavesdropping operation, presumably run by the National Security Agency.

In Zaire in mid-May, Katangese rebels staged an invasion from neighboring Angola. President Carter maintains that he has conclusive evidence of Cuban involvement. The evidence includes messages intercepted by the National Security Agency.

What is this agency, and how does it operate? How has it managed to emerge unscathed—in fact, almost unmentioned—while other U.S. intelligence arms were being pummeled by congressional investigations or the press over the past two years?

Actually, NSA, with its extraordinary skill at electronic snooping, is rated as Washington's single most important source of intelligence, an importance that has been increased substantially by the recent sharp cutback in secret operations of the Central Intelligence Agency.

With listening posts around the world, in space, air and on land and sea, NSA not only monitors the communications of other governments but gathers and analyzes the radar transmissions of potentially hostile ships, planes and land stations. It tries to crack the codes of other nations and also devises the codes that protect American secrets.

Information gathered by NSA has warned Presidents of impending war, prevented a major terrorist attack in this country and headed off at least one assassination attempt.

Two hurdles. Now, NSA's electronic espionage network is threatened by two developments. One is a revolution in encoding technology that is making it easier for America's rivals to keep secrets and vastly more difficult for the U.S. to crack the incredibly complicated codes that are coming

into widespread use. Coupled with this is an explosion in the volume of communications, making it more and more difficult to screen out information of value.

The other threat is new laws and regulations designed to protect the privacy of citizens, which agency officials fear may endanger their ability to do their job.

Many Americans have never heard of the National Security Agency. Most of those who know of the agency's existence have no clear idea what it does. This fuzziness NSA takes great pains to promote. Here, gleaned from interviews with experts in and outside government and from examination of official unclassified documents, is a sketch of America's superspy outfit, its achievements, its problems and a look at its future:

Is NSA Listening In?

By almost any standard of measurement, NSA is a huge agency. With more than 1.3 billion dollars a year to spend on its day-to-day operations, substantially more than the CIA gets, it soaks up almost a third of the nation's intelligence budget. Nearly 20,000 persons work in its nine-story headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., and thousands more man remote listening posts, funneling in information from ships, planes and land bases around the world. According to those who have visited NSA headquarters, it is, once you are past the fences and armed guards, much like any other federal office building, more modern than the Pentagon but not quite as attractive as the CIA headquarters.

NSA has been described as a giant electronic vacuum cleaner, scooping up all sorts of radio and wire communications, pouring them into the computers at Fort Meade, 15 miles north of Washington, and spewing out the world's secrets for the use of the President, other top government officials and military commanders in the field.

Sources of information for NSA range from simple little wiretap or electronic bugging devices to multimillion-dollar satellites that monitor the telemetry signals sent out during other countries' missile tests. Airplanes, ships and submarines constantly listen in on others' communications and record their radar signals. Technicians in ground stations collect the same type of information.

With this kind of worldwide intelligence-gathering network, questions have been raised as to whether the agency is spying on Americans as well as on foreigners. Congressional investigators learned

CONTINUED